

## What's in a Name?

The two dwarf siblings sat across from Sloane in their small apartment above the shop. They were sitting in their kitchen at the table, the rings they had made placed in the center of them.

Mulinn picked one up, looked it over, and then set it back down. As he looked into her eyes, Sloane set her full attention on him. “So, ye two were both successful. These rings be going ta be a very profitable venture. Tell us, how much do ye want for tha right ta sell them? now, 'afore ye ask, please consider that me sister provided all o' tha materials an' assisted. This be your design, lass. However, I do believe that shou' rightfully give her some portion o' tha claim for tha design.”

Before Sloane could reply, Reanny cut in, “What me brother is trying to say, lass, is that we are happy to pay you for your design.” She looked pointedly at her brother, “What you helped me do is going to make everything we do much more profitable. Now, what do you think?”

“Well, I do need funds. So, what do you say about—” Sloane stopped, her eyes opening wide as she considered something.

“What's the matter, lass?” Reanny asked.

Sloane's mind was racing, she knew exactly what they could do. The siblings were perfectly positioned in a new village amid a population boom. It was on a very busy route and was ideally situated to grow even as large as a city if what Maud had said was correct. That meant, with their literal perfect location, the siblings would make tons of money.

Especially, if they were potentially the first people in the world to sell magical items. If Sloane quickly gave them some designs for more possible items, they would be greatly indebted to her. Not that she wanted to take advantage of them, but she could easily leverage that. It could solve her funding for a long time.

With a smile, Sloane looked between Mulinn and Reanny. She almost wanted to rub her hands together as she got excited. “I have an idea, one that I think will be mutually profitable for the both of you and myself. I have ideas, lots of them really, about different items that could be

made using gems and their connection to mana. Magical items. I would be willing to give you designs to create and sell. However, I think instead of a straight fee, we could work out a way to share profits.”

Reanny and Mulinn Farum both got huge grins on their faces, and Sloane suspected they were vastly different reasons but resulted in one common thing. Money.

Reanny, contrary to Sloane, *did* rub her hands together. *That’s such a fantasy merchant thing to do.*

The dwarven woman looked Sloane straight in the eyes. “Lass, I think we’re going ta be friends for a long time. Let’s deal.”

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Four hours later the sun was setting, and Sloane was walking back to the inn. She had six more rings of various types in her satchel. They were made according to what Sloane felt would fit the knights. She *believed* she had their primary Domains pegged. If not, well, she could easily swap around gems.

Mulinn, Reanny, and her had talked for a solid two hours about the future. Sitting at a table, discussing designs. She had walked away with a contract. One that would give Sloane fifteen percent of any sales the siblings would make in the future and a stake in their business. They also gave Sloane an advance on what Mulinn expected to make from the new magic-focused business plan.

Mulinn had explained all about the banking guild, which she would open an account with after arriving in Thirdghyll. There was a small branch in the market but it was only available to current members. It would allow the siblings to directly transfer her profits into her account.

Stepping into the inn, Sloane saw the group of knights sitting around a table in the center of the room. Maud saw her and waved, causing the others to look up as she called out, “Sloane! Come on over! We have a lot to tell you!”

Sloane smiled, she had a lot to tell them as well. Things were moving forward and she now had a way to search for Gwyn without solely relying on others. Of course, that wouldn't stop her from trying to entice the knights into joining her more permanently.

With a wave, she called out as she walked toward the group, "I'm comin'! Ser Ernard! You better have gotten me some food! I'm starving."

Sloane laughed when his eyes went wide and he got up to run to the barmaid.

The other knights all greeted her as she sat down.

"So! What do you all have to tell me?"

Ser Gisele shook her head with a small smile on her face, "I don't know why Maud is making such a huge scene. We simply have some tiny news from Thirdghyll."

Maud's face went through a few emotions, surprise, betrayal, and then indignation before she spoke up to defend herself. "Knight-Captain! That's just rude!"

She looked to Sloane and explained, "Since Ser Gisele wishes to downplay it. A member of Count Sylvain Kayser's court in Thirdghyll was passing through and after a conversation with Gisele, he invited us all to attend a ball in three weeks. Evidently, the count wishes to introduce members *of a new people* that have arrived in Westaren. "

Sloane went wide-eyed. "You all got invited to this ball? He's going to have other humans there?"

Ser Ernard set a plate of food and a cup of water in front of her, chuckling. "That's not all. Ser Gisele *may* have misrepresented our group a bit to ensure we are invited."

It was Ser Gisele's turn to pretend at being affronted. "Ser Ernard, I simply portrayed certain facts through the colored glasses of western Ikios high society. "

She glanced at Sloane then explained, "Lady Sloane by her own admission fits well within the standard of a landed baroness in our cultures. To paint her as a republican aristocrat would not do her any favors in any of the kingdoms she visits."

Sloane was surprised, she looked at Ser Gisele and tried to talk, but found herself stunned.

Ser Ismeld swept her blond hair from in front of her eye and pointed a hunk of bread at Sloane. “She’s right. To make true progress as you search for Gwyn will require you to gain more access and potentially more connections than as a simple commoner. You need an edge. This will give it.”

Sloane looked to Cristole who gave her a subtle nod before taking another swig of his ale.

She nodded slowly, considering the implications. “Fine, you both make valid points. However, I have no idea how to act like a noble. At least not here. I have a vague idea of what it would entail just in my world, but the etiquette classes my parents sent me to when I was younger did not cover interactions with middle ages nobility.”

Ernald and Ismeld facepalmed, and the high elf woman muttered, "Of course, you were made to take etiquette classes..."

"Only nobility take etiquette classes here, Sloane." Ernald explained.

Ser Deryk who had been sitting silently like usual chose that moment to speak up. “I’ll have you know I am only twenty-six. I am not middle-aged.”

Sloane huffed a breathy laugh, trying hard not to facepalm as well. “First thing I’ve heard you say in two days and it’s a dad joke? Okay, okay. I understand, I will be this Baroness Reinhart. Is there any other news I should be aware of, or is it my turn?”

Ser Gisele nodded, “Yes, and this news isn’t as great. We got word about rumblings that are going on between the Vlaredia Empire and the Sovereign Cities. Specifically, the city of Constanden. The Vlaredians are using some type of excuse to try and threaten the city and have set up an army along their borders, *to protect the integrity of their “sovereignty”*. A clear insult to the Sovereign Cities. Nothing has happened yet, but we will need to be well prepared as we start traveling through Goosebourne and then to Swanbrook.

“The Vlaredia Empire is over two-hundred and fifty kilometers from here *over* the Dheg Laseig Mountains. They would have to go almost three-hundred kilometers south of their border and then travel about another two-hundred forty through the southern pass to even make it to Goosebourne.

“Westaren may be small, but their navy is well equipped. They wouldn’t allow the Vlaredian Navy to travel through their waters to hit the coastal cities. So, they’d have to sail further out to bypass the kingdom.

“So, with all that said, I think we’ll be fine. However, in the face of any external threat, the Sovereigns get extra prickly about outsiders. Especially if they travel from Westaren. You being a baroness and us a knightly order currently in your service should smooth over any inquiries.”

The knights all shifted in their seats as Ser Gisele finished, each finding another to glance at. It certainly didn’t help Sloane feel assuaged by the speech.

“You all do not look convinced,” Sloane noted.

Ismeld’s eyes shifted to Deryk, who sighed. “If war does break out, the Sovereign Cities are no slouches. Their dysfunctional nature does not stop them from banding together against external threats. They’re what you could call a *loose* federation. They all fight each other and constantly try to stab each other in the back.” The orkun leaned back, seemingly finished.

Ser Ernard chose to finish for him. The scholar looked tired all of a sudden, his earlier mood lost to his thoughts. “All that has done is hone those same blades for when their *Sovereignty* is threatened. They don’t call themselves the Sovereigns for anything. They take it with extreme seriousness. With war, they always seem to feel the need to exert themselves to make sure everyone knows to leave them to their brand of organized chaos.”

“And their chaotic mess of a political situation pushes individual cities in puffing up their feathered arses—”

“They like to accent their fashion with large feathers from the large ostriches that inhabit the various plains along the central corridor,” Maud whispered from beside her helpfully.

Sloane refocused back onto Ser Ernard who finished his impromptu lesson on knightly insults, “...and then they just lash out at the nearest outsiders.”

“So, we just need to look out for each other, and not provoke the feather-loving people with a superiority complex. Will this affect me gaining passage in Swanbrook?” Sloane asked, trying not to get concerned.

Ser Gisele shook her head as she joined in, “No. It shouldn’t. Nothing has happened, we should not focus overmuch on what we cannot affect. We will take precautions and we will try and prepare you for when we arrive in Swanbrook.”

The orkun woman slapped the table gently to get everyone’s attention. “Now, let’s get off of that topic. What did you have to show us?”

Sloane squinted her eyes as she got a bit confused. “What do I ha—Oooh! Yeah, okay. So, I’ve been busy. Like, extremely busy. First, I will need to set up an account at the banking guild in Thirdghyll.”

Ser Ernard’s eyes widened, “Oh really? I was planning to help you do that, but we hadn’t discussed that yet.”

Sloane smiled, “Yup! So, I have a contract with a pair of sibling merchants here.”

Sloane grabbed the contract from her satchel and passed it around and proceeded to explain the deal about profit-sharing based on her designs. Ser Gisele and Ernard seemed to have the most to say, but everyone chimed in to ask questions.

Ernard looked up from the contract after it got to him and he read it, “This is a good contract. Enforceable with the banking guild, and with mutually beneficial terms. You must have really helped them with your designs. Could you explain them a bit more? Were they something from your world?”

Sloane smiled and shook her head, “Nope! They’re from yours.” She reached into her satchel and pulled out the rolled leather that protected the rings. She proceeded to untie the leather string but was interrupted by Maud.

Maud reached over and grabbed her hand, pulling it over to examine her finger. “What is this ring?! This is beautiful! How am I just now seeing this, you hid it!”

Sloane laughed, “No! That’s what this is about, wait!” She unrolled the leather and showed them the six rings. “This... This is what I was making. I have one for each of you.” She hesitated and scanned the semi-crowded inn. “However, I think we should take this somewhere more private.”